

SCHOOL HISTORY

RAYVILLE ROSENWALD/EULA D. BRITTON

1904-1970

In 1904, forty years after the ratification of the 13th Amendment (the abolishment of slavery), a group of sixteen indigent black citizens of Rayville, Louisiana petitioned the District Court of Richland Parish to form the Rayville Industrial and Agricultural School Corporation. It is noteworthy that five years before the origin of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), this group had the where-with-all to test society and seek betterment for the Black youth of the Rayville Community.

As a result of the formation of this corporation, educational opportunities for African Americans in Rayville had its beginning. The first school was opened in 1907 south of Rayville, (the area known as the “Brickyard”). The school was known as the “College” and was headed by Reverend R. Amos, also known as Professor Amos. There were five additional instructors: Professor J. Anthony, Professor P. J. Sims, Miss Elliot, and Professor and Mrs. Toombs. Only Professor J. Anthony resided in Rayville. The others were from surrounding Parishes that had also established schools for Blacks.

The “College” had many financial difficulties as well as a lack of student participation. It had to be dissolved within two years of its beginning. It was not until October of 1916 that another school for the Black youth in Rayville was opened. This school opened in the Macedonia Baptist Church. A Professor Beasley, Sr. of Houma, Louisiana headed the school and served as its principal. Over the next four years the school grew as did the faculty. A Professor Jackson became the principal and his wife, Mrs. Jackson, along with Mrs. Clara Bell Coleman formed the faculty.

In 1922 the Odd Fellow’s Hall, at the corner of Jewel and Pearl Streets, was used to house the school. The school was now serving grades 1-6 and the faculty included Mrs. Eula D. Britton, Mrs. O. S. Hill and Mrs. Evans. Mrs. Ollie Hill served a brief time as its principal.

During the latter part of 1924, our school had its anchor cemented when buildings were opened on land purchased from Mr. William Tolliver Cook. This anchor was the large open area in front of our Gymnasium. The school had now grown to include the 7th grade and Mrs. Eula D. Britton was its principal. The first graduates from the 7th grade held their graduation ceremony in Macedonia Baptist Church. Members of this class were: Mrs. Mary Jenkins Kennedy (valedictorian), Mrs. Jessie Williams Gundy (salutatorian), Mrs. Geneva Cross, Mrs. Alberta Hawkins, and Mrs. Alberta Osborne. The second 7th grade class to graduate held their ceremonies at First Baptist Church in 1925. The school was now known as Rayville Colored School. In 1933, the school was approved as a Junior High School and was offering an 8th grade Completion Certificate.

When the 1936 8th grade class received their Certificates many of them showed an interest in going further with their education. There was only one (1) high school for Black youths in Richland Parish and that was located in Delhi, Louisiana. And, there were a few black students who had relatives in Union Parish, which had a high school and also in Grambling, Louisiana where the

Black College also had a high school. When a group of ministers in Rayville learned of the wishes of this class they purchased an old bus and hired a driver to transport these students from Rayville to Delhi on a daily basis. This effort proved to be as troublesome as not having a school, with the unreliability of the bus and the driver. This group of ministers, consisting of Reverend Henderson Smith, Reverend H. S. Carradine, and Reverend Eddie Howard along with the owner of a local Funeral Home, Mr. Douglas Allen, decided to petition the Superintendent of the Richland Parish School Board, Mr. E.E. Keebler, on the thought of expanding the Rayville Colored School to a High School. An agreement was reached to add an additional room a year (another grade) and the School Board would add another Teacher a year. Accurate accounts of how this process worked are sketchy, but we know that this was the beginning of the infusion of monies from the Rosenwald Foundation. These monies, which were matched by the local school and community, continued until the school was actually named Rayville Rosenwald High School in 1949.

The 8th grade class of 1936 became the first graduating class to receive high school diplomas in 1939 after completing eleven (11) years of school. The school had been given a “B” rating in 1939 and this first class consisted of eleven (11) students. In 1940 the school was accredited and given the “AA” rating which was the highest rating given to Negro high schools in the state at this time.

With the infusion of students from the many single room schools for African Americans that had been started in Richland Parish during the forties the school in Rayville became a focal point. Students came from Pardue, Holly Ridge, Mangham, Jones Chapel, Egypt, Pilgrim Rest and New Zion schools. By 1950 Rayville Rosenwald had become a nine month school, to include a twelfth grade. The school contained twenty- four rooms, employed twenty-six teachers with an enrollment of well over a thousand students. Other improvements consisted of a full-time Librarian (Mrs. Thelma Cormier), a well-equipped Home Economics Department run by Mrs. Annie D. Beck, and a fast developing Agriculture Department headed by Mr. Roy Lee Johnson. A complete lunchroom had been opened with seven of the most dedicated and talented lunchroom workers. They were Mrs. Susie Adams, Mrs. Bertha Brown, Mrs. Eddie V. Haynes, Mrs. Susie Lewis, Mrs. Emma Stenson, Mrs. Minnie Summers, and Mrs. Roberta Jones. Later cafeteria staff included: Mrs. Lula Alexander, Mrs. Elmese Elder, Mr. Bennie Harris, Mrs. Lula Howard and Mrs. Georgia Mae Smith. The school hired its first custodian, Mr. Maceo Little, who was later followed by Mr. Alex Elder. We must also mention four pillars to the foundation of these achievements; Mrs. Josie Draper, Mrs. Lureatha Mansfield, Mrs. Zephyr Stephens and Mr. Donzell Brewster. All were instructors during these real “trying” times.

Even though athletics and organized sports were always a staple of the school curricula all of these activities had to be conducted outside on the playgrounds. The need for a Gymnasium/Auditorium was always there, but it took the graduating class of 1945 to bring it to the forefront. This class raised and donated \$1300.00 as a downpayment to the Richland Parish School Board toward the building we now call “The Gym”. This gesture must be noted because it took another seven years before our “Gym” was constructed and opened at the beginning of the 1952-53 school year. Mr. Melvin Rogers and Ms. Moore presided over a rigorous health and PE program, and basketball teams. A noteworthy accomplishment was the 1959 and 1964 state championship wins in basketball, led by coach Melvin Rogers.

The final expansion of the school occurred in 1956 when a brand new addition was opened. This addition consisted of twenty-six classrooms (fully equipped), a Commercial Department, a Music Department, a Sewing Room, a Science Department, a Clinic, and two (2) teacher lounges. This year also marked the end of an era, Mrs. Britton announced her retirement. With her announcement the school board decided to actually rename the school in her honor. Thus, during her final school year as principal (1956-1957), she presided over “her” school, Eula D. Britton High School.

James P. Smith, a former student of this school and an instructor in the Rhymes Colored School System was named principal to begin the 1957 school year. By then the school was beginning to receive a few “new” books, as the habit of the schools for African Americans receiving the discarded books from the white schools was slowly being phased out. Mr. Smith served as principal until the end of the 1968-69 school year. When, 15 years after the decision of Brown vs. the Board of Education (calling for the integration of all public schools), Eula D. Britton High School was integrated with the 1969-70 school year showing only integration among the faculty, the school actually never did experience student integration. At the beginning of the 1970-71 school year the school was changed to a middle school, the name (Eula D. Britton) discarded, and all records and artifacts became unaccounted for. In 1980 all of the buildings were torn down and thanks to a small group of former teachers and students the “Gym” was saved. This group was led by Mr. Willie Larkin and Mrs. Creasy Thompson. They convinced the school board to allow the community and the Alumni of the school to assume responsibility for the building.

From the “College” to Eula D. Britton High School, the history of the educational plight of the Black community in Rayville has been phenomenal and will never be forgotten. From its famous sub-divisions that included Greer Road, New Town, Buck’s Pasture, River Road, Potts Town, Nelson Bend, Brickyard, Across the Canal, Mid Town, and even Bee Bayou a sense of pride will always remain. The Bus Drivers who transported these students were a part of this pride. They included the following; Mr. Arthur Brown, Mr. Dennis Coleman, Mr. Aaron Davison, Mr. Monroe Harris, Mr. Willie Larkin, Sr., Reverend Luther Mansfield, Sr., Mr. John Newsome, Sr., Mr. Joel Washington, and Mr. Shirley White. The original concept in 1904 until dissolution in 1970 was always based on the need to provide opportunities for the African American citizens of Rayville to better themselves through education. During the 63 years of actual school existence and through the 31 graduating classes, unlimited efforts were made to ensure the perpetuation of this idea.

Our indebtedness to the early pioneers of our community will remain eternally.